

## A turning point in our lives

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If we listen carefully to the scriptures today, especially the gospel, we are enabled to do something really quite extraordinary, to really enter into the very thinking of Jesus. Into his prayer life. Into his struggle. To understand this, how this happens if we listen, we should remind ourselves of last Sunday's gospel, which was as it always is on the first Sunday of Lent, an account of the temptations of Jesus, where the devil is trying to get Jesus to turn away from what God has asked him to do. At the end of those three temptations, Luke in the Gospel says, "And the devil left him for a time." This implies that Jesus was going to continue to be tempted, just as we are. He was fully human, so temptations would possibly come back into his life.

Today's gospel is a real turning point. It is a moment when Jesus is tempted. That is why he goes to pray. He wants to be alone and try to be in communion with God in a very deep way. And what is he tempted to? Well it goes back to last Sunday of Jesus' first Lent. After Jesus had been baptized and had gone apart to pray by himself, Jesus had heard God saying to him, "You are my servant, my chosen one, in whom I am well pleased." Those words that Jesus heard are from the beginning of the 42nd chapter of the book of the Prophet Isaiah. They are words about the servant of God who is called apart by God, the chosen one, the special one, and given a responsibility, a mission: to bring true justice to the nations. Jesus heard himself being called to be that servant who brings true justice to the nations, which means to proclaim God's word, to proclaim the need for change so that true justice, the reign of God, can happen. Where everyone has what they need, where everyone lives in peace. Where we have fullness of life and joy. The reign of God. True justice to the nations.

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And Jesus is given a very specific way to do that. As Isaiah says, "My servant does not cry aloud in the streets, does not break the bruised reed or crush the wavering flame." "To cry aloud in the streets," that is a phrase for calling to arms, to use power and violence and force. The servant of God doesn't do that. Instead, the servant is nurturing and loving. A brushed reed, a plant, is dying. If you want it to grow, you have to treat it very tenderly and carefully. A wavering flame, if you want it to burst into a full flame, you have to blow on it very gently. You draw forth; you can't use force. That is way a servant is to act, yet still bring about a dramatic change, unbelievable change.

When he is tempted in the desert, Jesus is tempted to give up the ways of God in guiding him. Instead, he is tempted to do it through wealth. Change the stone into bread, have all the wealth you think you need. Have all the kingdoms of the earth, power, armies, be able to dominate and control. That's the temptation, but Jesus says no. He chooses instead to follow where God is leading him.

Now in the gospel it is more than two years later, and Jesus has been engaged in going around to do those nurturing things, healing people. Reaching out to those who are suffering, drawing them closer to God. Forgiving. Welcoming sinners. Being friends with them, reaching out constantly in love and then at the same time challenging those who would try to do it otherwise. That is where Jesus began to get into trouble.

He knew at this point in his life, he was on his way to Jerusalem, if he kept going that way, kept doing what he

was doing, he was going to be handed over to his enemies, he would be tortured and killed. Executed. Tortured to death. So at this moment, Jesus is tempted again. Not to do it God's way, but to do it the way we usually think is the way to bring about change. If you are going to bring about true justice to the nations, you have to go to war. Maybe you have to take away from some things they don't have the right. Or if someone threatens you, you have to retaliate, you fight back. You don't reach out in reconciliation and forgiveness and love.

Jesus had been very bold in challenging those who were trying to lead the people in another way: the scribes and the Pharisees. I won't read it all, but there is a very powerful chapter in Mathew's gospel, Chapter 23, where Jesus says, "The teachers of the law, the pharisees, occupy the seat of Moses. Listen and you will be saved, but do not imitate what they do, because they themselves do not practice what they teach." Jesus says, "Woe to you teachers of the law, you pharisees, you hypocrites." He is criticizing the religious leaders. In John's gospel, at the very beginning of the gospel in chapter 2, there is that powerful incident where Jesus attacks the religious structure, the priests who are demanding payment from the poor for the turtledoves and the lambs that will be sacrificed. They are exploiting the poor. And Jesus says, "Get out of the temple. You are making it a den of thieves."

Jesus has been trying to change by proclaiming God's word, by proclaiming justice and light. Proclaiming the truth. He calls those who are hypocrites hypocrites in order to get them to look at themselves and change. So now Jesus is tempted once more. That is why he goes apart to pray. He has to deepen his communion with God. And as he is in these prayers, we hear, as Luke describes it. Jesus has a profound experience once more of God deep within his being, speaking. God affirms once more: "You are my chosen one. In you I am well pleased."

What God is saying is "Yes, what you are doing is right, so continue on this path, bringing true justice into the world, making the reign of God happen." Jesus is bringing about extraordinary change in the way people live, in the way they act toward one another, in the way they share the goods of the earth with all, instead of accumulating for themselves.

"Yes," God says, "I am well pleased in what you are doing." And then God even adds, saying to Peter, James and John, and to all the disciples, "Listen to Jesus. Listen to Jesus." You see it was a turning point in his life and if we listen to Jesus, perhaps, it can be a turning point in our lives. Ever since we have been baptized and committed ourselves to be a disciple of Jesus, we have committed ourselves to live according to his ways, to his values and what he teaches. But surely we have not always lived according to those ways faithfully and authentically. We too easily give into a desire to accumulate wealth, have more than we need, as individuals. As a nation, we are 5 percent of the world's people, we have 25 percent of the world's wealth and resources. For ourselves. Can that be right? Not if we follow what Jesus said that God made the world for all not just a few. Too often in our history we have used force and power to expand our nation, to be dominant in the world, to be number one. That is not the way of Jesus

So it is a moment if we try very hard to unite ourselves with Jesus today in prayer and experience what he experienced as he was being tempted. But then also with him, being affirmed by God saying, no that's not the way; follow my way, we can make this a very important turning point in our lives.

And that is what Lent is really all about. Lent is a time that we look deeply into ourselves, try to understand what Jesus is calling us to do. Find out how we are failing in some ways to do that, but then make this a turning point. Turn once more toward God, toward the way of Jesus. Listen to him and follow him, so that we too share in his work: bringing true justice to the nations, to the world, making God's reign happen, where everyone has a full human life, living in the spirit of joy, love and goodness.

Will we listen to Jesus? As we celebrate this Eucharist we can pray that we will listen and follow him.

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